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CHILDREN'S BEAT

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Feeding the Children

A cluster of federal and private programs tries to fill an obscured need

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RICHARD W. RODRIGUEZ / FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

Special needs student Melea Rosales, 4, right, participates in an alphabet game in an elementary class visited by the Fort Worth Star-Telegram last October.

Exceptional Struggles

Special ed services strained by families who don't speak English

BY CARA NISSMAN

When Anne Weaver suspected a second-grader had trouble seeing and hearing, the educational diagnostician waited to refer the Mexican girl for tests.

Before I made the referral, I called the agency doing the tests and asked them if there would be a problem if her family was here illegally," said Weaver, who helps assess students for special education in Kentucky's Shelby County public schools. There wasn't. But without that assurance, she said immigrant families fear that "you're the big, bad school coming after their child."

Over the last five years the number of Hispanic students in Shelby County has doubled, leaving special educators to devise new strategies to screen and serve a burgeoning immigrant population.

"As soon as we feel good about putting services in place, the population increases so much that we need more," Weaver said. "It's like we're building the plane as we're flying it."

Evaluation frustrations

School districts nationwide feel Kentucky's pain. New accountability standards laid out in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act and a new No Child Left Behind provision have raised the stakes for serving the special needs of immigrant children. About four million English language learners attend public schools in the United States, a 72 percent increase since 1992. About 9 percent of them receive special education services, according to a 2003 report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students.

Experts say one of the most enervating problems in special education is over-diagnosis: the erroneous referral of children who lack English-speaking skills but don't have learning problems. Stocking evaluation materials in Spanish can help. But

in general, while school systems trumpet their multilingual diversity, special services haven't kept up.

"It's not uncommon for one school system to report that they have more than 50 languages represented," said Joy Markowitz of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education Inc. "Our members are concerned with how to evaluate students who speak those languages and how to find qualified personnel to do it."

Some urban districts employ multilingual diagnosticians, school psychologists, teachers and support staff, but most areas suffer from a shortage of funds and talent. Seventy-five percent of districts serving English language learners with disabilities say they don't have enough qualified teachers to instruct this population, according to Development Associates, a government consulting firm based in Virginia.

To ensure that parents comprehend and contribute to the evaluation process, school districts such as Martin County, Fla., hire interpreters from outside businesses and agencies, or rely on parent volunteers. "We do whatever we can to find someone who speaks a family's dialect," said Loreen Francesciani, principal of Warfield Elementary School in Indiantown, Fla., home of many Mexican and Guatemalan transplants who speak Mum and Kanjobal dialects.

Resource-starved schools sometimes encourage parents to bring their own translators to help in their child's assessment.

The problem with these choices is that few people outside the special education realm understand the academic and medical jargon used in the meetings, said Judy O'Loughlin, a New Jersey-based national education consultant who taught special education and English as a second language (ESL) for 25 years. Families also risk having a translator who doesn't respect their confidentiality.

Ad-hoc translators are more likely to translate questions literally than to break down difficult concepts, said Walter Secada, professor of education at the University of Miami. An inexperienced translator might simply relay the query, "Is your child an auditory learner," instead of asking whether a child learns better by verbal or written instruction. Young interpreters from within the family may censor their translations if they're embarrassed or confused by what they're learning about siblings or cousins.

Even with translated materials and experienced interpreters, assessment tests can prove biased. Many recent arrivals to the United States come from rural areas where literacy isn't a high priority, so they can't take written tests. And picture-oriented tests aren't necessarily reliable.

"Educators have to think about a student's exposure to particularly American-based knowledge," said O'Loughlin. "Children from other cultures may have never seen the movie, 'The Wizard of Oz.' So if they're presented with a picture of the Tin Man, they won't know who that is."

Educating teachers

To cope with these complexities, school districts seek a new breed of special education teachers who are sensitive not only to children's physical and emotional challenges, but also to

their linguistic and cultural differences. Universities, including Colorado at Boulder and Texas at Austin, increasingly offer programs for aspiring teachers of bilingual special education and special education for students who speak English as a second language.

Future educators should receive more hands-on training to become "multiculturally competent" by learning the nuances between Vietnamese and Chinese communities, or Salvadorians and Spaniards, said Lillian Perdomo, executive director of the nonprofit Multicultural Community Service in Washington, D.C. Her group helps to open dialogue among cultural groups, and she is the parent of a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Perdomo said courses give teachers a glimpse of what they'll experience in classrooms, but thinks maximum impact comes from "getting new teachers involved in the community."

Even with new training, staff shortages require many teachers to learn how to work with disabled young immigrants on the job – sometimes before they're certified. "There's a real need for bilingual special education teachers and school psychologists," said Nancy Villarreal de Adler, director of New York City's Office of English Language Learners, District 75, which is dedicated to mostly recent immigrants with special needs.

"There's a real ethical dilemma going on," said Rhode Island College Associate Professor Nancy Cloud of the learn-as-you-earn approach. "Some bilingual teachers aren't as proficient as they wish they were in their languages; they lack the academic terminology. They don't know how to say the chambers of a bird's heart or how to tell the difference between vertebrates and invertebrates. Many don't know much about special ed."

Moving on and missing out

Few countries offer sophisticated special education programs, so the concept may be unfamiliar to families who enter the United States. When Diane Smith began researching an article on the challenges of educating immigrant children with special needs last fall, the immigration beat reporter for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* found that few parents were acquainted with their children's educational rights.

"Even many English-speaking parents say it is nearly impossible to make sure their special-needs children receive the education required by law," she wrote in her October 2003 story, "Language barrier a hurdle for some special-needs kids." "But language and cultural differences exacerbate the problem for Spanish-speaking parents, who sometimes don't even realize that their youngsters have rights to certain services."

When teachers reach out, parents may seem unresponsive, skipping conferences because they don't grasp their importance or they have more pressing concerns.

"A lot of immigrants work out in the fields picking tomatoes, string beans and peppers, and they don't have a lot of time," said Beatriz Coronado, disability services coordinator at the Redlands Christian Migrant Association in Miami. "They

have trouble with housing, health insurance and money, not just their children with special needs."

Weaver, the diagnostician, said her biggest frustration in dealing with the possibly impaired second-grader has been the family's lack of reliable transportation.

Traditional esteem for authority figures often keeps immigrants from questioning educators' recommendations for their children or challenging them when services don't seem to fit. "A lot of [immigrants] look at teachers and priests as elders to be respected," said Perdomo, "Mediation is not a concept that is embraced among [immigrants]." She recalled a case in which a boy who had initially been pegged for ESL classes was later switched to special education. But the switch came too late to help him before he aged out of school.

"[Parents] don't have the expectation that they have to watch what [educators are] doing," said Rhode Island's Cloud. "There's a sense of trust."

Intimidated parents may refuse assessment for fear the results will preclude their children from attending school, Weaver said. Many cultures have low expectations of special-needs children, so parents don't realize theirs can even receive services in the United States, said Amy Santos, an education researcher at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Fears of deportation keep countless illegal immigrants from seeking services for their impaired children, added Rosy Ramos, a parent of a disabled teen and administrator at a cross-cultural support group, Parent to Parent of Miami.

These misconceptions spur many families to move to other cities or states, or to send their children back to their native countries to protect them from being labeled, said Cloud. "Or they go to all the meetings and passively accept everything," she said. "But then they tell other parents, 'Don't let this happen to your child.'"

Special education sources

Reporters can call school districts' special education directors, colleges and parent advocacy groups to connect with diagnosticians, teachers and immigrant families, said *Star-Telegram* reporter Diane Smith. Here are some additional sources:

ALBA ORTIZ, professor of special education and director of the Office of Bilingual Education at the University of Texas at Austin, 512-471-6244; alba.ortiz@mail.utexas.edu.

JANE FLOETHE-FORD, director of educational services at Parents Helping Parents Inc. in Santa Clara, Calif., 408-727-5775, ext. 115; jane@php.com.

GRACE ZAMORA DURÁN, research analyst in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. Contact: Jim Bradshaw, 202-401-1576.

— *Cara Nissman*

Positive prospects

There are success stories involving immigrants and special education. Diane Smith led her story with Guadalupe Vasquez, who brought her son, Edgar, to Texas from Mexico seven years ago after he lost his vision, speech and movement in a bout of meningitis.

"I want Edgar to know how to give me a sign that he's my son, that he can tell me he's hungry, that he can show me that he loves me," Vasquez told Smith in Spanish. She is grateful, Smith reported, that his school system is helping the 8-year-old to achieve basic goals, and he's learning to read Braille.

Ramos, the parent advocate, said that many families' sole reason for coming to the United States was to enroll their children in special education. And immigrant parents who find success in the system often pass on their knowledge to those just embarking on the special education journey. Emma Ramirez Bell, an Arlington, Texas, resident whom Smith interviewed for her article, started *Las Familias*, a support group for Spanish-speaking parents, after advocating for her special-needs daughter.

Lots of parents experience "an evolution from not knowing what's going on to being so aware of their rights and the laws that they become grass-roots advocates," Smith said. "I've talked with many parents who had a lot of respect for teachers and had to put that aside to become fighters for their kids."

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Who's covered?

IDEA, or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, provides educational services for children diagnosed with the following disorders:

- Autism
- Deaf-blindness
- Hearing impairment, including deafness
- Mental retardation
- Multiple disabilities
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairments
- Serious emotional disturbance
- Specific learning disability
- Speech or language impairment
- Traumatic brain injury
- Visual impairment, including blindness

Younger children, including infants and toddlers, may receive IDEA services for developmental delays. See www.nichcy.org.